



Radio 2.0: How Facebook is enhancing audience participation for Irish radio audiences.

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**Proceedings of the
European Conference on
Social Media
University of Brighton
UK
10-11 July 2014**



**Edited by
Asher Rospigliosi and Sue Greener**

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**University of Brighton
Brighton, UK**

10-11 July 2014

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Asher Rospigliosi and Sue Greener
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Brighton, UK**

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Radio 2.0: How Facebook is Enhancing Audience Participation for Irish Radio Audiences

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Abstract: As a traditional mass medium radio is proving its flexibility and resilience in an ever more digitalised mediascape by increasing its presence on one of the fastest growing digital platforms, Facebook. With the radio industry in Ireland as a case study, this project examines the use of Facebook by radio producers and their audiences as a medium for deeper interaction and explores the functions this contact serves for the audience member, for the radio producer, and for society as a whole. Based on recent findings, this doctoral research argues that radio producers are increasingly engaging with their audiences through Facebook for commercial reasons, in an effort to build audience loyalty and grow their audience share in a highly competitive industry. Radio audiences are following their favourite radio programmes on Facebook in growing numbers seeking an enhanced media experience and opportunities to exercise their agency as active audiences and participate in the on-air and online conversations. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that public spheres and virtual communities are created on radio station Facebook pages and that some users build social capital between one another through extended interaction. The convergence of radio with Facebook is thus allowing an old medium to remain competitive at a time when digital media is threatening the traditional mass media. The methodology involves both qualitative and quantitative research methods including interviews with radio producers and audience members combined with a survey of the latter, textual analysis of radio station Facebook pages and a longitudinal content analysis of Facebook interactivity across the Irish radio industry. The project is nearing completion and therefore this paper will present the main findings that demonstrate the capacity of radio as a medium to engage with and profit from the introduction of new digital technologies, particularly Facebook.

Keywords: social network sites / Facebook / Irish radio / audience agency / audience participation / radio audiences

1. Introduction

Social Network Sites (SNSs) continue to grow exponentially in popularity representing, 'one of the fastest uptakes of a communication technology since the web was developed in the early 1990s' (Stefanone et al. 2010). This makes the study of SNSs very timely and relevant in modern media and communications academia.

One of the most comprehensive attempts to define and outline the phenomenon of social network sites was by Boyd and Ellison (2007) who define it as:

'web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site'

(Boyd & Ellison 2007: 211).

As digital media, including social network sites (SNSs), continue to develop and become increasingly pervasive in people's daily lives it is pertinent to consider what affect this is having on traditional mass media, particularly the still widely analogue medium of radio. Radio has faced down numerous technological threats throughout its history including the arrival of television, FM and stereo broadcast and more recently digital broadcasting and the internet. Despite fears that new media might threaten the viability of radio as it has print media; this paper argues that the opposite is closer to the truth. By embracing SNSs Irish radio stations are maintaining their competitiveness by offering the audience an enhanced media experience that further engages them and thus encourages them to return again in the future.

With the radio industry in Ireland as a case study, this project examines how Facebook is being adopted by radio producers and their audiences as a medium for deeper interaction and explores the functions this contact serves for the audience member, for the radio producer, and for society as a whole.

Academic research on audience participation has been largely overlooked by media scholars with most investigations focusing on the medium of television which this author believes offers very limited opportunities for participation when compared to radio (see Carpentier 2003). There is a large volume of

research that looks at SNSs and indeed Facebook from many different perspectives but is mainly US based research. The current research is unique due to its specific focus on the Facebook pages of radio stations and how those pages are being used by the radio stations and their audiences in Ireland – an area that has been overlooked by academics to date.

Furthermore, much research on audience participation involving SNSs has been in relation to political and civil involvement, issues surrounding social capital, and the role of SNSs in the wider community (see boyd 2008 and Ellison et al. 2007). The area of social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook is indeed a new and exciting field of study for academics however, the benefits of a better understanding for audience research and mass media organisations makes this study highly worthy.

Since the economic downturn which began in 2008 advertising revenue in mass media has decreased significantly in many countries in the European Union including Ireland and has caused the closure of many media companies. Despite Irish radio listeners continuing to listen to radio in strong numbers, 84% of Irish adults listen to the radio on a daily basis (Ipsos/MRBI 2014); advertising revenue in the Irish commercial radio industry has dropped by some 40% according to industry figures (Ashmore 2011). This has led to massive spending cuts, the consolidation of resources and a demand for new ideas to protect businesses interests in an industry.

Enter SNSs, specifically Facebook and Twitter which have been embraced with open arms by the Irish population much like the rest of the western world. Figures show that 57% of Irish adults above 15 years (2.4 million people) having a Facebook account and 27% having a Twitter account (Ipsos MRBI 2013). The current research found that between February 2011 to October 2013 Irish radio stations have seen significant increases in the numbers of audience members engaging on their SNS sites, Twitter followers have increased by 159% while the stations' Facebook pages have 35% more 'Likes' in that same period, and these numbers are still growing. Irish radio stations can now boast over 1.3 million aggregate Facebook page 'Likes' as of October 2013 with Twitter not far behind at just over 700,000 aggregate followers. The other mass media in Ireland, namely print and television, have smaller followings on Facebook and much less participation from the audience. Because the vast majority of radio is broadcast live it has the advantage of being spontaneous and impulsive and thus is a medium more conducive to real time interaction and participation from the audience (Winocur 2003).

Facebook was chosen over Twitter for this research project not only because it is the most popular SNS in Ireland but also because it offers more as a return channel for the audience to contribute and interact with radio stations. This was later confirmed through the audience survey which found that Facebook was also the most popular social medium preferred by audiences to interact with radio stations with 88% of respondents preferring it over Twitter (11%) and LinkedIn (1%). Ferguson and Greer found that Twitter is used mainly to disseminate news to the audience or for promotional purposes by radio stations (Ferguson & Greer 2011). In short two-way communication is not as prevalent on Twitter as it is on Facebook.

The top three radio stations with the most number of Facebook page *Likes* are all music stations targeting the 15-34 year old market supporting the argument that radio stations broadcasting to younger audiences are much more successful at engaging their listeners via SNSs than stations with older audiences. Recent figures also show that younger people are the largest cohort using Facebook and other SNSs in Ireland (Ipsos MRBI 2013).

2. Methodology

A multi-method approach was used to collect both quantitative and qualitative data. The use of multiple methods allowed the researcher to gather a rich collection of data and for the triangulation of data which strengthened the veracity of the findings. The bulk of the quantitative analysis was in the form of an extensive content analysis spanning over two years which tracked the growth of audience engagement with radio stations through Facebook and Twitter.

There were two main qualitative methods employed in this research, semi-structured interviews with ten radio industry professionals and a survey conducted with 419 audience members across three radio stations; Radio Kerry, Beat 102103 and RTE 2fm. The survey was also conducted with the audience of the *Tubridy* programme

on RTE 2fm. A total of ten interviews were carried out with radio professionals and the working practices of the radio producers were also recorded by use of direct observation during the broadcast of one programme each. The final method was a textual analysis of the Facebook pages of the stations in question.

In total four radio stations were involved in this research including one national public service station, RTE 2fm, a music and entertainment station for the 20-44 year old cohort. The talk based entertainment programme *Tubridy* presented by the eponymous Ryan Tubridy was also part of the study. Secondly, Beat 102-103 is a regional music station broadcasting to the south east of the country and aimed at the 15-34 year olds. Spin South West is a regional music station based in Limerick city and broadcasting to the 15-34 year olds in the south west of the country. And finally Radio Kerry is a full service local radio station broadcasting to all adults in county Kerry, in the south west of Ireland.

This research employed the inductive strategy of using original sourced empirical data to develop fresh social theory on the use and functions of Facebook in today's society. This concept, known as *grounded theory*, was developed by Glaser and Strauss who described it as the, 'discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research' (Glaser & Strauss 1999: 2). According to Glaser and Strauss the theory developed from this approach is so inextricably linked to the raw data that it is very difficult for critics to refute or challenge the newly discovered theory, unlike logically deduced theories which are 'based on ungrounded assumptions' (Glaser & Strauss 1999: 2).

3. Uses for the Audience

Uses and Gratification theory was used to frame the motivations of the audience's use of Facebook as previous research has found it a useful approach (see Raacke & Bonds-Raacke 2008). Uses and Gratification theory challenged the long accepted theory that saw media audiences as being passive, vulnerable subjects at whom influential media messages were being directed (Blumler & Katz 1974, Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch 1974, Schroder 1999). Uses and gratification considers audiences as active media users who exercise their own agency to seek out and select the media texts motivated by their individual needs. It has been argued that the internet provides a perceived higher level of interactivity for the audience (Seiter 1999), a more tangible sense of control, and the "subsequent connotations of increased audience agency" (Graham 1996: 171) and therefore there are greater opportunities for audiences today than ever before.

This study found that audiences visit radio station Facebook pages seeking an enhanced media experience and three main types of content (1) additional information, (2) entertainment and (3) opportunities to learn about and enter competitions. These findings are in line with those of other authors analysing the motivations of Facebook use particularly the motives of seeking out information and entertainment (Park et al. 2009, Sheldon 2008). Audiences also want to exercise their agency by interacting and participating in the on-air and online discussions which Facebook provides the infrastructure for.

Irish radio audiences operate in a cycle which is intended by the radio stations to maintain their loyalty. At the outset 1) the audience are regular listeners of a radio programme 2) and visit the programme's Facebook page for an enhanced experience with more information, a wider variety of entertainment and the opportunities to enter competitions to win prizes. 3) The audience remains on the radio station's Facebook page for the opportunity to participate and contribute to the online narratives. As a result of a rewarding experience on-air and online the audience returns to consume the on-air and online media products again in the future, thus completing the cycle. Figure 1.1 illustrates this process.

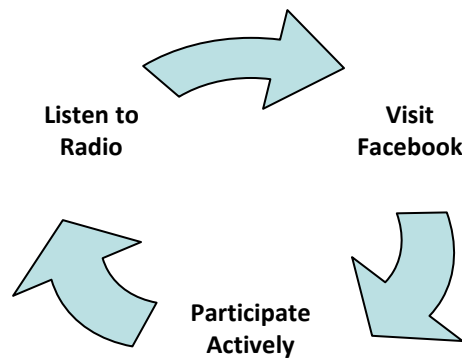


Figure 1: Radio Audience Cycle

The first stage sees radio audiences listening to one or numerous radio stations on a daily basis. This is the origin and foundation of the relationship between audience and radio station and one which the radio stations nurture for commercial reasons (Smythe 1981). The second stage is when audiences visit Facebook seeking information, entertainment and to enter competitions. Producers use Facebook as another tool to supplement a radio station's on-air content, to help promote the radio station through digital platforms in order to drive audiences back to the on-air product or to visit the website, both of which earn the station revenue from the audience's visits.

After spending some time on a Facebook page the audience member usually decides to participate to some extent thus moving to the third stage of the cycle. Participation with radio programmes via Facebook is an important function for audiences and is an example of the audience becoming more active and exercising their control (Schroder 1999: 39). By using online platforms including Facebook the radio station is able to engage the audience at a deeper level than through on-air content alone. The efficacy of engaging audiences online has been identified by other authors as it offers perceptions of increased interactivity and opportunities to exercise audience agency, see Seiter (1999) and Graham (1996).

The cycle begins again when the audience comes back to the on-air and online content again because of the positive experience they have had on Facebook. Enli & Ihlebaek argue that audiences who are afforded the opportunities to participate in television programmes experience deeper engagement which builds loyalty amongst the audience (Enli & Ihlebaek 2011). This is precisely what the managers and producers at the commercial radio stations stated was their motivation behind using Facebook – to engage audiences in the expectation that they will return as radio listeners which earns the business more revenue. Recent research found that mass media organisations that use SNSs for the purpose of interacting with their audience benefit through increased audiences and constructive feedback that helps the organisation improve its product (Chaputula et al. 2013).

The evidence shows that radio audience are loyal radio listeners and the current study found that users return to Facebook at least once a week. Therefore we can see a pattern of consistency with audiences returning to the Facebook page to view the content posted there and to participate in the discussions and conversations taking place provided they enjoyed the experience. As with any media product the challenge for producers is to consistently deliver quality content that is fresh and stimulating and that gives the audience what they have come to expect in order to continue to engage them.

Not all individuals interact on the same depth when they visit a radio station's Facebook page. The schematic below was adapted from Syvertsen's work on audience participation with television and illustrates the three levels of interaction that audiences engage at; (1) *active – low level of participation*, users observe and 'Like' or 'Share' content; (2) *reactive – medium level participation*, users are more involved, composing and posting comments that relate to the content; and (3) *interactive – highest level of participation*, users instigate a conversation or contribute material that influences the online or on-air narratives (Syvertsen 2004) (see Figure 2 for an illustration of the Levels of Audience Interaction). Most users are participating at the *active* level likely due to the minimal mental and physical effort required to click 'Like' or 'Share'. Fewer users take the time and effort to compose comments and very few users post or submit their own material to be posted on the Facebook page. Content analysis across the four Facebook pages over a five day period revealed a total of 21,543 'Likes', 3,464 'Shares', 6,081 Comments and 44 Posts.

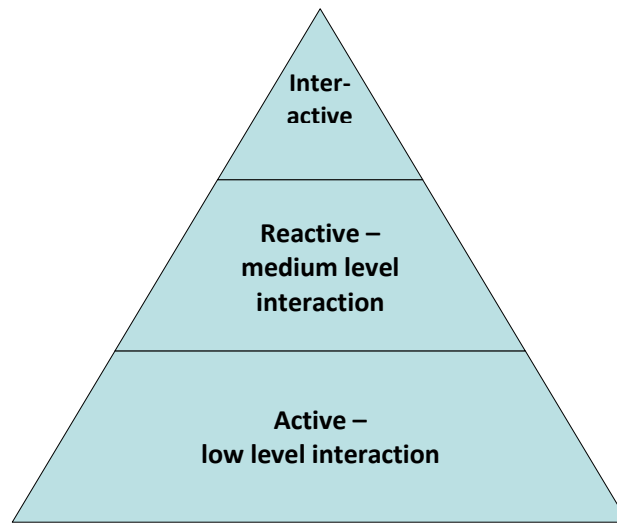


Figure 2: Levels of Audience Interaction

4. Functions for the Radio Stations

Interviews held with station managers found that there are four main functions for Facebook by radio stations: (1) to improve their online presence, which will create more opportunities to (2) promote the station, and (3) help increase audience interaction, which will ultimately (4) increase listenership. This process is presented in Figure 3 below.

Digital media are a mainstay of modern society and becoming more and more prevalent by the day as technology allows us to be connected in more and more ways through mobile communication hardware such as smartphones and tablets and the software that runs them. SNS are the latest software to open new and exciting communication and connection opportunities and radio station management are beginning to understand the potential especially where young audiences are concerned and the need “to be where the audience is” as Nessa McGann of Spin South West puts it (McGann 2013). Increasing the station’s online presence is therefore the important first step in this process. Station management and producers believe that Facebook is a very useful tool for promoting the station and driving traffic back to the on-air product or the station’s website, both of which generate revenue for the station – at present businesses cannot gain revenue directly from Facebook. Because people are spending increasing amounts of time on Facebook it has become a useful way of attracting the audience’s attention and bringing them back to listen on-air.

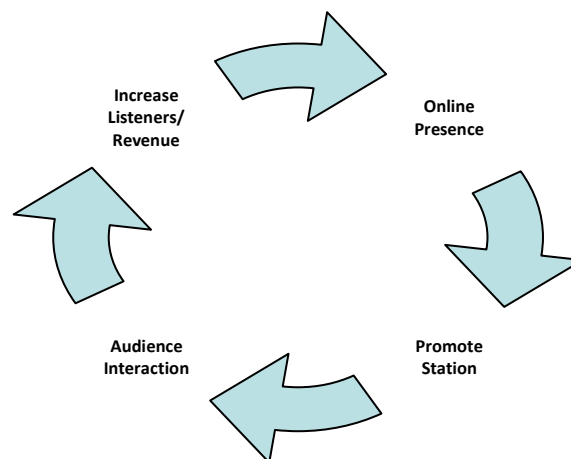


Figure 3: Radio Station Marketing Plan

The third function, that Facebook offers increased interaction between the audience and the station, is what makes the SNS so valuable for producers. Modern media consumers, radio listeners included, want to engage in two-way communication with media producers and are demanding increased agency over the programmes they consume (Schroder 1999). This empowers the audience and makes them media users deciding what they want based on their needs. Facebook fills this need by offering the audience increased interaction opportunities including the prospect of sharing their own multimedia content with the other users. Brecht envisaged a time when radio would fulfil its powerful potential by becoming not only a transmitter of information, but a receiver of information from audiences as well (Brecht 1932 [1964]). It is safe to say Brecht's vision has become a reality with Facebook acting as the return channel.

Listenership figures, or ratings as they are often called, are what drive the radio industry and is the true measurement of success as it dictates the fee a station can charge its clients for advertising and sponsorship (McDowell and Dick 2003). Understandably increasing the number of listeners of their respective radio stations was cited as a key motive for station managers and producers for embracing Facebook because audiences are the "primary product, or commodity, of radio" (Hendy 2000: 31). Stations are motivated to improve the bottom line through what Dallas Smythe describes as the "commoditisation of audiences" (Smythe 1981), where the audience are reduced to a tangible commodity that works to earn money for the media organisation.

A number of the radio stations studied namely Beat 102103 and Spin South West were able to boast a steady increase in listeners over recent years while Radio Kerry have consistently retained their listener numbers. Producers maintain that a consistent and coherent social media strategy has a direct correlation to the strong listenership figures being recorded. Those interviewed were unable to provide concrete evidence to support their assertion and previous research found only a weak correlation between stations' quarter hour share and the numbers of Twitter followers stations had (Ferguson & Greer 2011). Further research in this area would be highly worthy. Beat 102103 C.E.O Gabrielle Cummins adamantly contends that because her station's young audience is so connected via social media that she would lose a large proportion of her audience if her were less active on SNSs. Cummins maintains that her station is consistently increasing its listener numbers because they are engaging new audiences through their on-air programming, complemented by their social media activity, including Facebook (Cummins 2013). Interestingly the public broadcast station involved in the research, *Tubridy* on RTE 2fm, did not see audience retention as a primary motivating factor behind their Facebook use. This may be due to the station's reduced reliance on commercial revenue due to their significant public funding support.

Digital media including SNSs are constantly expanding their reach and are taking up increasing amount of people's spare (and working) time (comScore 2011). By preserving an entertained, informed and engaged audience via on-air and online content radio is very well positioned to weather the current economic storm and enjoy significant commercial success as the economy recovers.

5. Functions for Society

This paper argues that a key function of Facebook interaction for society is that it creates online virtual communities (Rheingold 2000). These are spaces where users interact online in environments that share the same characteristics as traditional geographic communities with similar relationships existing online that exist in physical interaction. Numerous authors have presented their essential characteristics of 'community' (see Hillary 1955, Wellman & Leighton 1979, Anderson 1991, McMillan and Chavis 1986, Rheingold 2000, Baym 2010, Delanty 2010, Gruzds, Wellman, & Takhteyev 2011) and commonalities from these have been used to frame this segment of the research. The common characteristics of community identified were; users should have a common shared location; that members should share an emotional connection to other users; that members feel they can influence the community; that members share resources and support; that members have a shared connection with one another; that members feel a sense of belonging to the community; that members have interpersonal relationships with one another; and that members have shared identities.

Members feel part of online communities where they interact with and feel part of a group with other members, even though they do not know the vast majority of the other members, similar to Anderson's (1991) *Imagined Communities* where despite not knowing or being able to actually see all other members in the community the members still feel a sense of unity with them. It was found that stronger feelings of virtual

communities existed for the respondents who were audiences of existing communities in Ireland. Radio Kerry's audience felt the strongest feelings of community; this was most likely because of the existing sense of identity and unity already established in the county through various cultural factors. Beat 102103's respondents likewise felt that they were part of an online community – an extension of the community of south east Ireland which the station broadcasts to and represents. As RTE 2fm is a national station it stands to reason that their audience would have less of community sentiment, which they did. Durkheim posited that the more individuals interact with one another in a group or society the closer and more cohesive they become as a group through what he calls *social integration* (Durkheim 1984: 276). These virtual communities are still in their infancy however, and perhaps over time a stronger sense of community may develop in these groups.

This research also sought to understand to what extent Habermas' public spheres are created on the Facebook pages of Irish radio stations (Habermas 1989). Are the pages open public spaces where rational critical debate can occur amongst Facebook users, culminating in a contribution towards the formation of public opinion? Evidence suggests that public spheres do exist on radio station Facebook pages, based on findings drawn from the audience and textual analysis of the Facebook pages. Although some of the content is believed by the audience to be of a frivolous nature many audience members believe public spheres, perhaps closer to what Keane calls micro-public spheres, are created and do exist on radio station Facebook pages and that these discussions can help shape public opinion on important matters (Keane 1995). Tolson argues that commercial broadcast outlets can't possibly consider themselves public spheres due to their uncertainty of whether to primarily be entertaining or informative entities for their audiences and this appears to hold true on radio station Facebook pages (Tolson 1991: 197).

Although the conditions and spaces are there for micro-public spheres to exist, perhaps these opportunities are not being used to their full potential at present because audiences aren't looking for critical debate when they come to a radio station's Facebook pages they are only seeking information and entertainment.

6. Conclusion

This paper argues that radio audiences are following their favourite radio programmes on Facebook in growing numbers and argues that they are seeking an enhanced media experience and opportunities to exercise their agency as active audiences and participate in the on-air and online discussions. Radio producers are increasingly engaging with their audiences through Facebook for commercial reasons, in an effort to build audience loyalty and grow their audience share in a highly competitive industry. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that public spheres and virtual communities are created on radio station Facebook pages. Facebook is proving to be a powerful asset for the Irish radio industry to remain competitive in the modern digital world by embracing the change and using new media to enhance the audience experience and further engage the user to the on-air and online programming.

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